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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 CAIRO 000389

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SUBJECT: LOCAL COUNCIL ELECTIONS PRIMER

REF: 2006 CAIRO 862

Classified By: Minister-Counselor for Economic and Political Affairs  
William R. Stewart, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary and Comment: On April 8, Egypt will hold its first Local Council Elections (LCE) in six years. Polls will be held nationwide, with an estimated 50,000-52,000 seats up for grabs. The National Democratic Party (NDP), which is currently conducting its first-ever "primaries" to select most of its candidates, is widely expected to win the lion's share of local council seats. The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) has announced its participation in the LCEs (unlike its boycott of the last LCEs in 2002), and the resultant crackdown on likely MB candidates and election workers has already begun, with approximately 300 MB members arrested in the past two weeks alone.

12. (C) Summary and Comment (cont.): Despite the relative political insignificance and limited authorities of local councils, the NDP and MB both hope to flex their political muscle in the LCEs, with the NDP aiming to demonstrate its domination of the Egyptian political landscape, and the Islamists endeavoring to prove that their 2005 parliamentary victories were not a fluke, and that, even after the 2007 constitutional amendment which expressly banned political activity based on religion, they remain a powerful political force that cannot be ignored or shut-out. To date, the politically apathetic Egyptian public seems largely unaware of the looming polls. Widespread fraud, and perhaps some election day violence in districts where MB candidates are running, is anticipated. There is little hope that the April 8 elections will be anywhere near to international electoral standards or make a meaningful contribution to Egypt's democratic development. End summary and comment.

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ELECTIONS DELAYED IN 2006  
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13. (C) Egypt normally holds LCEs every four years, but following the MB's gains in the 2005 parliamentary elections, the planned 2006 LCEs were delayed for two years (ref A). The GOE claimed the delay was necessary so that reforms could be made to modernize Egypt's local governance system; non-government interlocutors speculated the postponement occurred so that the regime could re-group and prevent more embarrassing MB electoral successes. Changing the Local Administration law is a complex, multi-layered effort, and despite the GOE's intent to amend the law prior to the 2008 elections, it now appears that new legislation will not be put before parliament this year. The GOE originally planned to shift the electoral system for LCE's from single district, first-past-the-post approach, to a party list system, thereby neatly freezing out MB candidates (who must run as "independent" candidates, as the technically illegal MB is not a political party). However, as the election system for

local councils is governed by the Local Administration law, the lack of a new law means that the 2008 LCEs will be run on the same single-district constituency system as in prior elections.

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ELECTORAL FRAMEWORK  
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14. (C) Approximately 50,000-52,000 local council seats will be up for election on April 8. Races will be for five different types of local councils - village, neighborhood, city, district and province. Each voter will cast ballots for three councils, depending on his/her place of residence - in cities, voters will choose neighborhood, city, and provincial councils; in the countryside, the electorate will vote for village, district, and provincial councils. The balloting process will be fairly complex, with voters needing to choose approximately 44 candidates to vote for from a ballot crammed with names. (Note: Reportedly, symbols, often used in Egyptian elections in order to assist the approximately thirty-percent of Egyptians who are illiterate, will not be used in the 2008 LCEs. End note). According to government sources, the LCEs will be organized and overseen by the Ministry of Interior, in coordination with provincial governors. (Note: Egypt's Supreme Electoral Commission, formed in 2007, has oversight solely for elections for national-level bodies (People's Assembly, Shura Council, the presidency), not for local electoral contests. End note). Due to the controversial 2007 change to constitutional article 88, judges will not supervise every polling station, but rather state employees will oversee most polling and vote-counting stations, while judges will be present only at each district's central polling station. Candidates will

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formally register to run between March 4-13, following which the GOE will review the candidates, and then announce on March 23 the final lists. At this point, is not clear what basis the GOE will use in reviewing candidate applications and determining the final lists. If past elections are any guide, it is plausible that during the review process, the government will try to weed out at least some MB candidates, as well as other undesirables.

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AUTHORITIES OF THE LOCAL COUNCILS  
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15. (SBU) Currently, local councils have fairly restricted authorities that center around performing limited oversight of executive branch activities in their districts. They also approve governmental developmental and social plans in their jurisdictions. In rural areas, local councils reportedly have the critical power to approve the issuance of seed to farmers. The anticipated changes to the Local Administration Law are expected to increase the authorities of the councils, with the widespread expectation being that they will be given some budgetary responsibilities, and tasked with assisting governors and other state officials with actually preparing local development plans, rather than simply approving them.

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RULING PARTY GEARS UP  
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16. (C) The National Democratic Party (NDP) won 99.9 percent of the seats in the 2002 LCEs, which the MB boycotted, and is aiming for a similar outcome in 2008. The NDP is currently holding its first-ever internal "primaries" to select party candidates for the LCEs. According to NDP Secretary-General Safwat El Sherif, seventy-percent of the NDP's candidates will be chosen in these internal elections, and the remaining thirty-percent will be selected by the party leadership. Sherif has pledged publicly that ten-percent of the NDP's candidates will be women. NDP Secretary for Organization,

Ahmed Ezz, who is spear-heading the NDP's elections effort, recently told us that the NDP leadership will also nominate some Copts as candidates. Ezz highlighted that the NDP will only allow one party candidate in the LCEs, and will not permit NDP members who run as "independents" to re-join the party. (Note: In the 2005 parliamentary elections, many NDP members not selected as the NDP candidate ran as "independents," and if they won, re-joined the party. Ezz views this as one of the main factors behind the MB's success in 2005 - that the NDP vote was often split between two NDP-affiliated candidates - and has vowed to implement party discipline in the LCEs to guard against a similar outcome in 2008. End note).

17. (C) The NDP is the only Egyptian political party that has the organizational capability and will to contest all 50,000-plus races. According to press reports, nearly 82,000 NDP members are vying to be the party's candidates, and the "primary" elections have to date been rife with accusations of fraud and some low-grade violence (knife-fights, brawls). Ezz noted to us that, given such episodes even in the internal NDP elections, he expects that April 8 will witness some violent altercations similar to those of the 2005 parliamentary elections, during which 11 Egyptians died. Ezz expressed steely confidence for the NDP's prospects in the LCEs, largely dismissing concerns about the MB by noting that the NDP is now "very strong in the countryside, due to the improvements in rural living standards that have occurred over the past few years." (Note: Conventional Cairene wisdom holds the reverse to be true - that the MB's strength is particularly pronounced at the local level, especially in rural areas, and that the continuing poor conditions there provide the opportunity to the MB to offer services the government does not. End note).

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OPPOSITION PARTIES HALF-HEARTEDLY PREPARE  
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18. (C) In our recent conversations with the Wafd, DFP, Taggamu, and the Ayman Nour-wing of the Ghad party, political party leaders have taken a lackadaisical approach to the LCEs, noting generally that they are "not very important," "how can we possibly win against the NDP," "what is the point," "we do not have enough money or candidates to contest the elections nationwide," and "the only value in running is to keep our party in the public eye." Each of those parties, in addition to the Nasserite party, at this point plans to run a negligible number of candidates. On February 22, the Wafd, Taggamu, DFP, and Nasserite parties announced a "decision to coordinate" in the LCEs, which practically will

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mean supporting each other's candidates in races where the parties are not running against each other.

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MB THROWS ITS HAT IN THE RING  
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19. (U) After months of coy uncertainty, the MB announced on February 21 that it would contest the LCEs, with MB Supreme Guide Mehdi Akef telling a packed press conference, "We call on Egyptians of all political inclinations ... all the able, honest, and devoted people who love their country, to take responsibility and remove the corrupt, the opportunists, and the profiteers!" Referring to the estimated 300 MB members who have been arrested over the past two weeks (among them, according to the MB, many planned LCE candidates, as well as campaign workers and organizers), Akef said, "This campaign of detentions will not prevent us from participating in the elections effectively." Speaking at the same event, MB Deputy Supreme Guide Mohamed Habib commented, "We shall let the media, experts, and the Egyptian people decide whether we succeeded or failed. If the regime wished the elections to be clean then the Brotherhood would participate in large

numbers, but the inevitable fraud and deficient judicial supervision (at the polls) ... makes the environment difficult for our candidates."

¶10. (SBU) The decision to participate in the LCEs was apparently controversial within the MB, with some MB MP's telling reporters that the organization should boycott the elections, "to spare the effort, money, and arrests." Indeed, most local analysts we spoke to are confounded by the MB's choice, noting that the group will likely be shut out at the polls by government fraud and the security services, and many MB members will end up in prison; a high price for the organization to pay for gaining a few local council seats, at most. Some senior MB leaders have signaled that the MB's decision to participate was driven in no small part by the group's desire to demonstrate its commitment to the democratic process. Essam el Erian, prominent member of the MB's political bureau, told the media that the MB is participating because, "This is another chance to tell the world that we are a group for peaceful change." Deputy Supreme Guide Habib told journalists, "The aim behind our participation is to stir Egyptian politics, because without Brotherhood participation, the elections would simply be dead and colorless, and we want to avoid that additional frustration for the Egyptian people."

¶11. (SBU) Due to "security considerations," the MB does not plan to announce prior to the elections the names of its candidates or the total number running, the expectation being that local communities will know by reputation or word of mouth whether a particular candidate is MB-affiliated. Rumors are swirling around Cairo with regard to the number of seats the MB will campaign for, with estimates at this point ranging between 500 - 5,000. Akef has noted publicly that the MB's central leadership is "leaving to (our leaders in) every province the decision of whether to participate or not." According to a recent article in the pan-Arab daily "Al Sharq Al Awsat," the MB plans to run some female and Coptic candidates, in order to demonstrate its purported commitment principles of citizenship.

¶12. (C) Akef announced on February 21 that the MB will not "solely" use its trademark slogan - "Islam is the Solution" - in the LCEs, but "will also raise slogans against corruption and inflation, because the security tactics that the regime pursues may force the MB to utilize these other slogans." In the lead-up to the elections, the MB is once again demonstrating superior organizational and PR skills, with links on its websites to information about how to become an LCE candidate (down to copies of the needful registration forms), and information about the responsibilities of local councils. No other Egyptian political entity, including the NDP, has similar information on its website.

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WHY ARE THESE ELECTIONS IMPORTANT?  
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¶13. (C) Despite the relative political insignificance and limited authorities of local councils, the NDP and MB are clearly focused on the April 8 contests. Both hope to flex their political muscle in the LCEs, with the NDP aiming to demonstrate its domination of the Egyptian political landscape, and the Islamists endeavoring to prove that their 2005 parliamentary victories were not a fluke, and that, even after the 2007 constitutional amendment which expressly banned political activity based on religion, they remain a powerful political force that cannot be ignored or shut-out.

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For both, the LCEs also provide the opportunity of a dry run for the more significant 2010 parliamentary elections. Furthermore, per the constitutional requirements for independent presidential candidates, a strong showing for the MB in the LCEs could potentially alter the calculus for the next presidential election, opening the door to the

possibility that Islamists might be able to compete for Egypt's highest office. (Note: Constitutional article 76 states that an independent presidential candidate must obtain endorsements from 250 elected members of Egypt's national and local representative bodies, of which there must be a minimum of 65 endorsements from members of the People's Assembly, 25 from the Shura Council, and 10 from local councils in at least 14 governorates. Currently, the MB holds 88 seats in the People's Assembly, but none in the Shura Council. End note).

¶14. (C) At this point, the Egyptian public seems largely unaware of the looming polls. In our unscientific polling to date, more Egyptians we spoke with were aware of the U.S. presidential primaries than of their own coming local elections (a common response to our queries about the LCEs is, "We have local councils?!"). Given this lack of awareness, and the apathetic voting track record of the Egyptian populace, we do not expect high voter turnout on April 8. Despite the MB's decision to contest the elections, it is near inevitable that the NDP will "win" a sweeping victory, due in no small part to government manipulations, outright fraud, intimidation of voters by security services, and the possible barring of voters from polling stations, should the government feel that the MB is mounting a serious electoral challenge in particular districts. There is little hope that the April 8 elections will be anywhere near to international standards or make a meaningful contribution to Egypt's democratic development.

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